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ABSTRACT

Most organizational problems are communication problems. The administrator must employ strategies for listening to employees (personal listening), and must allow the employees to participate in the decision-making process (corporate listening). The Marietta City School System (Georgia) employed several strategies to deal with the passive resistance often encountered when change is undertaken. The strategies were meant to enhance both personal and corporate listening skills. In addition to providing a personal example of a concerned listener and holding weekly discussions with the administrative team members, the superintendent interviewed each administrator and each teacher. He followed up with the use of a modified "delphi technique" for gathering opinions and establishing priorities. Further strategies included frequent meetings with parents, teachers, staff, and community committees along with conducting annual staff and community surveys. (EM)

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HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PROFESSIONAL STAFF

CORPORATE LISTENING PROCESS

EXHIBITS

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Clinic B-35

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PROFESSIONAL STAFF

When an organization experiences a problem and investigates the root cause, the final report invariably says that the problem was the result of a communication disorder. Many times this is only a more acceptable way of saying that the organization has some individuals who don't get along with one another. In some cases, this is true. However, the odds are that if the problem was caused by employees who don't get along with one another, their personality conflict is rooted in an inability to communicate with one another. In other words, most organizational problems are indeed communication problems, but labeling a communication problem as such does absolutely no good unless something is done to deal with the problem. All too often we view communication problems as either not serious enough to do anything about or so serious that there is nothing that can be done. Both attitudes are incorrect.

We have known for some time that communication skills are learned and like most learned skills some learn to use these skills more effectively than others. We have realized that those learning to speak more effectively than others tend to be more successful in life. In fact, an all-out effort has been made by many to acquire greater proficiency in public speaking. Aspiring businessmen often pay large sums of money to take commercial courses aimed at learning to speak effectively in public. Our school systems have recognized the great value of the ability to speak well and counsel students into speech courses, debate clubs, extemporaneous speaking competitions, oratorical contests and the like. Americans have worked hard to develop the speaking portion of the effective communications equation. However, it has only been recently that we have given any major attention to the skill of listening; the other required ingredient in the communications formula.

The success of any organization is dependent upon effective communications. In some less sophisticated or less mature organizations, communicating directives to staff is the most important element in the communications equation.

This is true in organizations such as the military, in situations where an immediate decision and unquestioning obedience is essential (medical emergencies and the like), or in organizations where the work force is less mature than most educational establishments. In public schooling, however, we generally have a highly intelligent, very mature work force - a work force which does not accept orders unquestioningly without soon building up a sense of resentment. This resentment usually manifests itself in a negative attitude which inevitably destroys productivity.

The effectiveness of a superintendent, a board member, or a school system is dependent upon communications with staff which result in a sense of enthusiasm for the job and relative satisfaction with ones role in the organization.

Everyone associated with schools have probably encountered the school administrator who would much rather be listened to than listen and, more than likely, his organization had problems with productivity. There probably was little evidence of the enthusiastic creative energy and esprit d'corps we all associate with the truly effective organization.

I believe that most leaders can go only so far toward accomplishing this highly desirable state of organizational effectiveness through use of the power of speaking alone.

To progress beyond this "stall-out" point, the organizational leader must employ strategies for listening and allowing his employees to feel a part of the organizational decision-making process.

Many school organizations tend to reach this point quickly because of the relative intelligence and maturity of its professional staff.

In the Marietta City School System, we have employed several strategies which have helped us reach beyond the passive resistance often encountered when change is undertaken. We have been earnestly working toward putting strategies into place to enhance both personal and corporate listening skills.

Personal listening skills are those skills individuals possess and use. Those

mechanisms which allow employees to have input into the organization's decision-making process I refer to as corporate listening. Both are required to bring about a truly effective organization. Perhaps an even more accurate way of saying this is to say that the staff perception of administrative listening has a great deal to do with worker satisfaction and productivity. Administrative use of personal listening will go a long way toward achieving worker satisfaction. However, employees will never believe you are serious about listening unless you put vehicles for corporate listening into place as well.

In the specific listening strategies we have used in Marietta, the secret is balance, truthfulness, and the building of faith. We have tried to improve principal and Central Office administration personal listening skills through example and through participation in our version of a management team. We have emphasized the value of listening in our discussions of organizational and management philosophy. We also have a weekly meeting of principals and other key administrators to discuss proposed new programs as well as policy and procedural changes. During these meetings, we often allow the group to modify plans, suggest completely new programs or processes, or in some instances to vote yes or no on a program. This is where balance and truth must enter into the process. The superintendent must not fear communicating that while some items will be put up for a vote only input for modification will be allowed in other situations, and there will be still other situations where only comment and discussion for clarification will be allowed. Everyone must understand that the superintendent cannot abdicate the responsibility the school board gives him by putting everything up for a vote. However, sufficient balance must be maintained so the staff develops faith in the superintendent's commitment to team management. We have tried to be truthful with staff members when explaining the staff input processes. We have not tried to lead them into thinking that everything will be put up for a vote. We have tried to maintain a proper balance in these processes between voting, input for modification, comments and questions for clarification and suggestion-seeking. The

maintenance of this balance between these modes of corporate listening is essential to building the faith in the organization and its leaders which is required to pass the "stall-out" point in productivity and effectiveness previously mentioned.

We recently undertook a fairly radical change process. One which would require changing attitudes, beliefs and behavior of most employees. The superintendent initiated the process by interviewing each individual administrator and each faculty as to the current strengths of the organization and its programs as well as areas needing improvement. This opportunity was used to demonstrate to staff members that the superintendent was willing and able to listen to staff members.

The second step involved the use of a modified "delphi technique" for gathering ideas on areas of improvement and establishing priorities. Exhibit #1 is the form used to seek these ideas. The suggestions received from employees were then listed eliminating duplicates and sent back out for staff help in narrowing the field. Exhibit #2 list the twenty (20) suggestions for improvement which garnered the most votes. All staff members were then asked to rank these "top 20 vote-getters" so that the superintendent and the board could use staff opinions in establishing a long-range plan for system improvements.

From the beginning, staff members were made aware of the fact that legally the board had the authority and the responsibility to set directions for the school system, and that this process was only to let the board know staff feelings. However, employees were assured that the board was interested in their opinions and would use the input to help set system goals.

In addition to the staff list, PTA presidents met with the superintendent and established their list for board consideration.

Exhibit #3 shows the four board priority goals and the 76 corresponding administrative objectives for accomplishing those goals. Not only do the objectives take into account most of the staff and PTA suggested improvements, but they also set specific objectives with target dates in keeping with good management practices. The publication of

these objectives and regular reports on progress provide a feedback loop to staff and community which demonstrates that we have indeed listened.

Several other corporate listening practices are used in Marietta:

- Each month the superintendent holds an open-ended question and answer session with two different teachers from each school.
- The superintendent also meets monthly with two different parents from each school to discuss items of interest to the parents.
- Weekly meetings with central office senior administrators and with local school principals have become part of our management team concept. Any member of the groups may place items on the agenda and reactions (both positive and negative) to ideas put forth are encouraged.
- Annual staff and community surveys are used to measure satisfaction with the school system.
- All administrators are asked to use anonymous staff and peer survey instruments at least annually to gain "feedback" on their job performance. These are private data sources and do not enter into the formal evaluative process.
- In addition, certain procedural strategies are utilized to ensure opportunity for staff and community feedback on such regular occurrences as new policy adoptions and annual budget adoption.
- Staff/community committees are the norm, rather than the exception for such things as curriculum reviews, establishment of the annual school calendar, reviewing the student discipline code, and studying the merit-pay for teachers question.

Naturally, none of this would be possible without a systemwide commitment to making the Marietta School System a superior place to work and to receive an education. We try to approach all problems with a common sense, trusting approach.

We believe that more effective programs will result when all concerned have had an opportunity to shape the program and thereby establish a sense of ownership or commitment for the success of the program.

EXHIBIT #1

Suggested Topics for Goals List

Please list below those items your school faculty and staff feel should be addressed during the next three or four years as system-wide priorities or areas in which our school system's performance should be improved. All suggested topics should be listed. No suggestions should be discouraged. The list will be prioritized at a later date.

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EXHIBIT #2

MARIETTA CITY SCHOOLS

May 25, 1981

MEMORANDUM

TO: All Employees

FROM: Roy D. Nichols, Jr. RDNJr.

RE: Phase III Systemwide Goal-Setting Process

Below are listed the "Top 20 Vote-Getters" from last week's survey and a few additional suggestions which were offered by survey respondents. Please prioritize the list by placing the numeral "1" in front of the item which you feel should be the School System's top priority. Place the numeral "2" in front of the second most important item, "3" in front of the third most important, etc. Rank all items including the Other Suggested Goals 1 through 25.

Please do not use the same numeral more than once.

TOP 20 VOTE-GETTERS

_____ Upgrade student achievement in the basic skills.

_____ Develop systemwide promotional policies which will minimize social promotions and prevent students from being advanced before they are ready to handle increased academic expectations.

_____ Upgrade the in-service offerings so that they are more meaningful to teachers and so that state certification and Southern Association requirements can be satisfied through local workshops.

_____ Improve communications throughout the system so that employees have more direct access to administrators and greater input into systemwide decisions.

_____ Improve school/parent communication patterns by establishing frequent parent/teacher conferences, by mailing important documents home and by improving format for progress reports.

_____ Revise curriculum to bring about sequential course of study K-12 in all subjects and update the curriculum in all areas every five years.

_____ Develop special program for "slow learner" who does not qualify for special education placement.

_____ Provide a greater level of systemwide supervision, coordination and teacher assistance in all subject areas by qualified, effective personnel.

_____ Provide trained specialists for art, music and physical education in all elementary schools.

_____ Develop systemwide plan to improve student discipline.

_____ Change system for obtaining substitute teachers so that an adequate supply of qualified substitute teachers is available at all times.

_____ Develop systemwide student attendance plan which will encourage more consistent student attendance at school.

_____ Provide students with more counseling services at all grade levels.

_____ Establish a pre-first grade program for students who are not yet ready to perform at a beginning first grade level.

_____ Increase the amount of teacher planning time, especially just prior to report cards going out.

_____ Develop a student transportation system which will allow all schools to begin at a reasonably early hour and to end the normal school day by 3:30 p.m.

_____ Provide better "benefit and salary package" for employees.

_____ Pay employees a bonus for unused sick days after maximum of 75 has been accumulated.

_____ Limit pupil/teacher ratio to 20:1 in grades K-3.

_____ Minimize clerical work presently expected of classroom teachers and other certificated employees.

OTHER SUGGESTED GOALS

_____ Establish a systemwide standard of dress for professional employees.

_____ Provide release-time for parent conferences.

_____ Allow different teachers to use different teaching methods rather than expect all teachers to teach materials similarly.

_____ Revise requirement for annual physical examination.

_____ Post pay schedule for all School System positions annually.

EXHIBIT #3

DATE 11-1-81

Marietta City Schools

Administrative Plan for Accomplishing System Priorities

1981-1984

I Develop and institute programs which will most appropriately suit the educational requirements of each student served by the Marietta City Schools.

A. By May of 1983, the reading program will be reviewed and modified as needed.

B. By May of 1984, the average of systemwide achievement test scores will be at least two months higher than the 1980-81 scores for each grade level.

C. By May of 1983, the math program will be reviewed and modified as needed.

D. By May of 1984, raise the average of systemwide achievement test scores at least two months higher than the 1980-81 scores at each grade level

E. By November of 1983, standards for written composition will be implemented for grades K-12 and a program to help students meet these standards will be instituted.

F. By May of 1984, systemwide achievement test scores in spelling will be at least two months higher than those achieved in 1980-81 at each grade level.

G. By July of 1982, a standard penmanship program will be selected for use in all elementary schools.

H. By November of 1983, a consistent program for low-average achieving students will be developed and instituted for grades K-12.

I. By July of 1983, a recommendation will be made to the Superintendent as to the feasibility of establishing a pre-first grade program and third grade basic skills classrooms.

J. By November of 1983, the program for high-average academically oriented students will be thoroughly reviewed and modified as needed, K-12.

K. By November of 1982, a program which will prepare college-bound students to take the PSAT and SAT tests will be instituted.

L. By November of 1982, Advanced Placement (AP) courses will be instituted at the high school.

M. By November of 1981, the feasibility of using computer-aided instruction in the high school will be studied and a recommendation will be submitted to the Superintendent.

N. By November of 1982, the program for students with special talents and interests will be thoroughly reviewed and a plan for improvement will be recommended to the Superintendent.

O. By September of 1983, the number of co-curricular activities offered to students will be significantly increased.

P. By May of 1982, a thorough study and evaluation of the feasibility of instituting an elementary school counseling program will be completed.

Q. By May of 1982, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the junior high school's and the high school's guidance programs will be completed and recommendations for improvement will be submitted to the Superintendent.

R. By November of 1981, the curriculum review and revision committees for Reading, Social Studies, Science, Math, Business Education, Consumer Education, Industrial Arts and other vocational subjects will be formed.

S. By September of 1982, curriculum guides for subject areas mentioned in the above paragraph will be redesigned so that they are consistent with the format suggested in the Summer 1981 report on curriculum review.

T. By May of 1983, curriculum guides for Fine Arts, Foreign Language, Health, Physical Education, Driver Education will be redesigned so that they are consistent with recommendations contained within the Summer 1981 report on curriculum review.

U. By October of 1983, a program aimed at preparing all students to master the necessary skills and test-taking techniques to demonstrate required achievement on the CRT and CBE tests will be implemented.

V. By May of 1984, curriculum guides for English, Spelling, Literature and Humanities will be redesigned so that they are consistent with recommendations contained within the Summer 1981 report on curriculum revision.

W. By October of 1981, a systemwide in-service committee will be formed for the purpose of planning and coordinating the Marietta City Schools' professional in-service education plan as outlined in the Summer 1981 report.

X. By October of 1981, a survey of staff members will be completed to determine in-service needs for 1981-82.

Y. By May of 1982, an in-service program which allows quality in-service experiences yet which provides flexibility for individual school faculty members as well as providing staff development units for certification renewal as per Summer 1981 report will have been successfully implemented.

Z. By November of 1982, elementary school teachers will be trained in the use of newly selected penmanship program.

AA. By September of 1983, teachers will be trained in the techniques of teaching written composition.

AB. By November of 1982, workshops will be held which teach instructors techniques which will help students develop decision-making, research and thinking skills.

AC. By June of 1982, primary grade teachers will be trained in methods of identifying characteristics of students who may need special education services so that early identification of students in needs of help is accomplished.

AD. By November of 1983, teachers and principals will be trained in ways in which they can work more effciently and use instructional time more wisely.

AE. By May of 1982, the new in-service plan evaluation will reflect a rating of Superior by at least 75% of the professional employees.

AF. By May of 1982, a thorough study will be completed and a recommendation made to the Superintendent regarding alternatives for improving the quality of art, music and physical education instruction in all of the elementary schools.

AG. By May of 1982, a study of the possibility of returning to the semester system will be complete and a recommendation made to the Superintendent.

AH. By September of 1982, an attendance plan designed to increase student attendance will be developed and instituted.

AI. By September of 1982, a student discipline plan aimed at minimizing the annual number of suspensions and expulsions necessary will be developed and implemented.

AJ. By May of 1982, a study of the feasibility of using computer-aided instruction at all grade levels will be completed and recommendations made to the Superintendent.

II Institute administrative practices and procedures at all levels which will enable the Marietta City Schools to be efficiently run, well ordered and responsive to the needs of our community, our students and our employees.

A. By September of 1982, a study will be completed and recommendations will be made regarding the standardization of administrative practices and procedures from school to school.

B. By June of 1982, elementary school student assignment procedures and patterns will be reviewed in order to establish more definite attendance zones.

C. By September of 1982, pupil progression standards similar to those recommended in the Summer 1981 report will be established and implemented.

D. By January of 1982, a minimum level of CRT mastery will be established for students being considered for promotion.

E. By August of 1982, lists of minimum essential skills in Reading and Math will be developed which parallel the CRT and CAT tests.

F. By September of 1983, an annual evaluation cycle for all system employees will be initiated.

G. By November of 1981, field testing of an instrument for the annual evaluation of principals will begin.

H. By May of 1982, the job descriptions of all system positions will be reviewed and revised as necessary.

I. By September of 1982, an annual evaluation cycle for all certified employees will be initiated.

J. By September of 1983, an annual evaluation cycle for all non-certificated employees will be initiated.

K. By August of 1982, a plan for placing a standard type and quantity of equipment (including office machines, audio-visual equipment, sports and physical education equipment and playground equipment) at each school of similar grade configuration will be developed.

L. By March 1, 1982, a study will be completed and recommendations made to the Superintendent concerning salaries and fringe benefits for employees of Marietta City Schools for the purpose of increasing the system's ability to attract and keep qualified people.

M. By December of 1982, a thorough study of the merits of remaining in the Social Security system will be completed and a decision made.

N. By May of 1983, a study will be completed and recommendations made to the Superintendent concerning suggestions for improving the working conditions of Marietta City Schools' employees.

O. By May of 1983, a systematic repainting and upkeep plan for all system facilities will be established.

P. By May of 1983, landscaping and grounds care at all schools will be noticeably improved.

Q. By October of 1981, a program aimed at keeping energy consumption in school facilities at the 1980-81 level will be implemented.

R. By October of 1982, a program to improve gas mileage of school bus fleet will be implemented.

S. By October of 1981, textbook selection and adoption procedures will be implemented as recommended in the report of the 1981 Summer Study Committee.

T. By May of 1982, new textbooks in Reading, Social Studies and Elementary Science will be adopted.

U. By May of 1983, new textbooks in Math, Business Education, Industrial Arts and other vocational subjects will be adopted.

V. By May of 1984, new textbooks in Fine Arts, Foreign Language, Health, Physical Education and Driver Education will be adopted.

W. By September of 1982, the practice of having each school establish annual improvement goals will be instituted.

III Improve internal and external communication patterns of the Marietta City Schools in order to promote greater public and staff understanding of and participation in school system activities.

A. By October of 1981, a committee will be established to plan and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive communications plan.

B. By November of 1981, a planned system of internal communications which includes a schedule for a regular dialogue between the Superintendent and representative groups of teachers will be developed and instituted.

C. By May of 1982, a system of awards and rewards for outstanding teachers and for employees who provide noteworthy service will be developed.

D. By September of 1982, a system of awards and rewards for students K-12 will be developed.

E. By August of 1982, an effective means of communicating the school system's fringe benefit package to all employees will be implemented.

F. By November of 1981, a pattern of regular meetings between the Superintendent and PTA representatives will be established.

G. By November of 1981, a comprehensive plan for producing printed materials about the school system and its programs will be developed.

H. By September of 1982, a new slide-tape presentation which promotes the school system and its programs [illegible]e completed.

I. By August of 1983, create other media presen[illegible]ns which communicate information about specific systemwide programs within the Marietta City Schools

J. By August of 1983, give principals the assistance necessary to create media presentations about their schools.

K. By May of 1982, publish annual reports to parents from each school which describe the school's successes and tells about goals for the upcoming school year.

L. By May of 1982, publish a school system annual report to the community which tells of the system's accomplishments.

M. By August of 1982, a Parent Education and Community Volunteer Program will be established.

IV Develop positive, supportive attitudes toward the Marietta City Schools on the part of students, parents, employees and community members.

A. By January of 1982, administer a citywide survey to obtain feedback data on the degree of satisfaction with the school system and its programs.

B. By May of 1983, readminister the 1982 survey instrument for the purpose of making a comparative study concerning the degree of community satisfaction.

C. By October of 1982, principals will begin to function as systemwide administrative personnel through greater participation in systemwide decision-making.

D. By May of 1982, survey all schools to determine health of the organizational climate at each school and within the system.